Covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls

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While considerable research exists on bullying among P-20 students, few studies address bullying and gifted student populations in P-12 schools. Moreover, studies on covert aggression and gifted student populations are unknown. This exploratory study modified A Survey of Gifted Eighth Graders About Bullying (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b) and examined reflective covert aggression experiences of gifted adolescent girls with their gifted and non-exceptional female peers. Participants included 27 gifted adolescent girls from two suburban secondary schools in the Midwest who completed a 10-item Reflective Questionnaire and attended Structured Group Interviews conducted by the research team. Participants tallied instances, both experienced and observed, for eight topics of covert aggression in grades six through eight and included short narrative responses on their subjective experiences. Participants then discussed their subjective experience responses during Structured Group Interviews with their gifted girl peers. Tallied incidents (N = 1037) showed increased prevalence during the transition from grade six to grade seven, decreased prevalence between gifted girls in a homogeneous environment, and peak prevalence in grade seven. Incidents of covert aggression between gifted girls and their non-exceptional peers accounted for 65% of the total number tallied. The most prevalent topics of covert aggression included grades, intelligence, and name-calling. The subjective experience responses showed covert aggression between gifted girls and their non-exceptional peers related to their differentness while incidents between gifted girls focused on competitive topics of intelligence and grades. Gifted adolescent girls found empathy and support for their high abilities among their intellectual peers.

Keywords: covert aggression, relational aggression, bullying, adolescence, gifted girls.
covert aggression to provide safer, more inclusive environments for them to achieve their academic potential in P-20 schools.

**Literature review**

Given the relative lack of research on bullying and giftedness, we incorporated literature from the broader field of bullying and P-20 student populations to provide context for gifted adolescent girls and covert aggression. These studies included bullying and adolescence, bullying among gifted students, bullying and gender, covert aggression and P-12 girls, and recommended prevention and intervention strategies for bullying.

**Bullying and adolescence**

Studies on bullying within the general student population often sampled a wide range of grade levels, including lower elementary, upper elementary, middle/junior high, and high school age groups. Estell et al. (2009) found “late elementary school years are a time when classroom social dynamics may be particularly important to bullying and victimization” (p. 136). They found social dynamics played an important role in the culture of bullying since popularity often determined social groups and the subsequent victimization of classmates. Students who identified with aggressive peers increased the possibility of others considering them bullies as a result of those associations.

Tabor and Woloshyn (2011) examined bullying within popular adolescent literature and noted characters presented in television shows, movies, and books often associated female beauty with cruelty and meanness. The Tabor and Woloshyn study showed “popularity is largely defined by social status which is a primary concern for all the main characters … the most popular characters are those who are physically attractive with an ideal body image” (p. 230). Tabor and Woloshyn found striking similarities between the characterization of adolescent girls and school social structures in fiction where adolescents girls encountered bullying behaviors ranging from relational to physical aggression in schools.

**Bullying among gifted students**

A groundbreaking study on bullying in eighth grade gifted student populations (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b) examined their retrospective experiences in roles both as bullies and as victims. According to Estell et al. (2009), gifted students “tend to have patterns of social behavior, peer acceptance, and peer affiliations that are distinct” (p. 137) from their chronological age peers in general education. Peterson and Ray (2006a) found the gifted student victimization related more to differentness than intellectual ability (p. 258). A gifted student participant in the Peterson and Ray (2006a) subjective experience study suggested jealousy might have caused much of the bullying gifted students faced compared to their non-exceptional peers (p. 257). Peterson and Ray (2006b) found “teasing about intelligence and grades was at its peak in grades 7 and 8, reflecting the literature and perhaps reflecting increasing awareness of achievement differences in the peer culture” (p. 160). Peterson and Ray reported emotional impact peaked in grades five (13%) and six (11%) with ratings of a lot and statistical significance about intelligence highest in grade seven. Peters and Bain (2011) suggested different reasons for the victimization of gifted students and their non-exceptional peers, as “gifted students were rated as less aggressive and less likely to be victims of aggression compared to the non-gifted students” (p. 628).

Wood and Craigen (2011) suggested gifted students faced a choice between embracing their intellectual ability and enjoying social popularity among their peers. They found gifted students might “experience frustration, anger, and disappointment in their quest to find like-minded peers or in response to being misunderstood and rejected by the same-age peers” (p. 844). Estell et al. (2009) found gifted students as likely to bully or to experience bullying by their intellectual peers, and their non-exceptional peers as more likely to bully and to encounter bullying. Moreover, teachers tended to view gifted students more prominently within the school’s social culture and considered them less likely to bully than their non-exceptional peers. Peterson and Ray (2006a) found “giftedness is associated with a unique vulnerability to bullying … but [gifted victims] assume responsibility for resolving it themselves” (p. 257). Their intellectual ability to resolve conflicts and apply coping strategies may explain why educators often perceived gifted students less likely as either perpetrators or as victims of bullying behaviors.

**Bullying and gender**

Although the traditional definition of physical bullying might conjure up the physicality of older boys stuffering younger boys in school lockers, girls engage in bullying as well. Peterson and Ray (2006b) reported “a higher percentage of gifted males than gifted females … were bullied and were bullies” (p. 160). However, the Peterson and Ray survey included nine types of overt aggression including name-calling, pushing/shoving and teasing rather than less direct or covert types of aggression often associated with females. Peterson and Ray found prevalence rates of overt bullying and gifted girls peaked in grades five through eight at 38%-39%. Instances of traditional bullying of gifted girls peaked at two to three experiences in grades six through eight with prevalence rates of 15%-16% (p. 155).
Tabor and Woloshyn (2011) examined bullying portrayed in adolescent literature and found boys and girls engaged in and responded to bullying experiences differently. Male characters engaged primarily in overt, physical types of bullying. However, mean girls engaged in both overt bullying such as tripping and shoving as well as covert aggression by making snide comments, excluding certain girls, and humiliating their victims. Tabor and Woloshyn examined fictional characters who seemed to reflect adolescent culture today. They found boys engaged in physical bullying that represented how boys should act (e.g., tough, strong). Girls, however, used humiliation and exclusion to maintain how girls should look (e.g., attractive, fashionable). Fictional main characters reflect self-esteem and self-concepts accordingly, with vulnerability and self-consciousness. In these ways, fictional characters mirror contemporary discussions about boys as bullies and girls as mean girls (p. 239).

Covert aggression and P-20 girls

Although covert aggression occurs in all student populations, fewer studies examined covert than overt aggression in schools. A possible explanation for fewer studies might relate to the less obvious and non-physical form of bullying that might escape notice by parents and school officials. Olweus (2003) considered less overt forms of bullying “as harmful and distressing as more direct and open forms of harassment” (p. 13). Olweus found physical bullying occurred far less frequently among all populations of school-aged girls as girls more often engaged in negative behaviors such as excluding individuals from social groups or occasions, manipulating friendships, and spreading rumors about one another. Peterson and Ray (2006a) found grade eight gifted students reluctant to classify nonphysical teasing and name-calling as bullying; however, gifted students reported extreme distress from nonphysical aggression and stated verbal bullying “takes its toll” (p. 259).

Prevention and intervention strategies

Studies on bullying in P-20 populations often recommended prevention and intervention strategies for homes, schools, and communities. These strategies included increasing awareness that they could make a difference in the lives of students who experienced bullying. Cross (2001a) recommended an expanded and more inclusive definition of bullying with both overt and covert negative behaviors and both intentional and unintentional victimization. Peterson and Ray (2006b) found coping strategies most helpful, in descending order, included “family, friends, self, no one, teachers, personal belongings, God, and counselors” (p. 159) which indicated gifted students often coped with their bullying experiences without the assistance of teachers or counselors. Their prioritization suggested school officials might increase vigilance to prevent covert aggression and intervene more effectively when it occurs.

Peterson and Ray (2006a) observed, “... only adults have the power to address the power imbalance inherent in bullying and to create prevention programs” (p. 265). Peterson and Ray (2006b) suggested gifted facilitators and school counselors establish small groups or support groups that address issues for both bullies and victims in safe environments. These groups “can help children to improve interpersonal skills, acknowledge the perspectives of others, solve social problems, express feelings, feel heard, and interact more effectively with peers” (p. 162). Cross (2001b) recommended gifted facilitators, classroom teachers, school counselors, principals, and parents recognize their ability to address bullying both inside and outside of school because victims of bullying need adult advocates to help them address and cope with experiences of victimization.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Despite media attention through Mean Girls and Queen Bees and Wannabes, little research addressed P-20 gifted populations, and few studies examined covert aggression in broadly defined student groups. Webb (2016) and Robinson and Noble (1991) found gifted students might be at risk for developing internalized disorders such as depression and anxiety in response to social stressors. Two key studies (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b) researched the gifted exceptionality population and traditional forms of bullying. Informal, anecdotal observations from gifted facilitators suggested gifted adolescent girls experienced covert aggression at school, yet the literature lacked studies on gifted adolescent girls and their subjective experiences with covert aggression at secondary levels.

This study adapted the non-standardized A Survey of Gifted Eighth Graders About Bullying (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b) instrument to examine the reflected experiences of gifted adolescent girls and covert aggression with their gifted and non-exceptional girl peers. We formulated one research question measuring the prevalence of covert aggression in grades six through eight and a second question evaluating the subjective experience of gifted adolescent girls and covert aggression:

- How many instances of covert aggression did gifted adolescent girls observe and/or experience in eight specific topics between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted girl exceptionality groups in grades six through eight?
- How did gifted adolescent girls view their subjective experiences with covert aggression related to eight specific topics between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/
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Given the Peterson and Ray (2006b) finding that prevalence peaked in grades six through eight, we anticipated practical significance for (a) lower prevalence of covert aggression between gifted/gifted adolescent girls in grades six and seven, and (b) greater prevalence between gifted/non-exceptional girls in grades six and seven.

Methods

Pilot studies

The primary investigator conducted two pilot studies with adolescent gifted students at a nearby middle school and high school to test the Reflective Questionnaire as an adapted Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) survey with similar topics and short narrative responses. After the pilot studies, the primary researcher added a Structured Group Interview to probe subjective experience short narrative responses on the Reflective Questionnaire. Since the pilot studies included male participants as convenience samples, Reflective Questionnaire written instructions included the possibility of gifted male adolescents observing covert aggression between gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional girl peers. Although the Reflective Questionnaire remained unchanged following the pilot studies, the 27 participants in the present study included only gifted adolescent girls.

Participants

The primary investigator invited two graduate students from a Gifted Special Education university program employed as full-time gifted facilitators to participate in independent study field research. The primary investigator required the co-researchers to secure written school administrative approval from their respective middle and high schools and subsequently submitted an application to the university institutional research board to work with human subjects. When approved, the gifted facilitators distributed informed consent forms stating the purpose of study, explaining the research procedure, and ensuring the privacy for each potential participant. The consent form stated volunteers could withdraw from the study at any point without reprisal or penalty. Volunteers under the age of 18 returned consent forms signed by their parent/guardians.

Since all identified gifted girls in the two schools received invitations to participate in the study, all volunteers received an equal chance of selection. Although 30 subjects volunteered to participate, this study reported results only for the 27 subjects who completed the Reflective Questionnaire and engaged in the Structured Group Interview from two secondary suburban schools. Eleven girls attended grades seven and eight at a middle school of 1000 students. Sixteen participants attended grades 9 through 12 at a high school of 550 students. All participants qualified for special education gifted services provided through a resource room. Participant ages ranged from 12 to 18. Qualified participants from the middle school and high school located in two separate geographic regions formed the sample for the study.

Procedure

Reflective Questionnaire. We invited gifted adolescent girls who returned signed informed consents to complete the 10-item Reflective Questionnaire. Gifted facilitators supervised participants who completed the Reflective Questionnaire individually and anonymously in the resource room or in a quiet separate room, according to their preference, during their seminar class period. Participants who selected a quiet space received supervision and responses to their questions about the Reflective Questionnaire. All participants received the same definition and explanation of covert aggression, and all participants received the same instructions to complete the Reflective Questionnaire. The instructions asked participants to tally the number of instances of covert aggression they either observed and/or experienced for eight topics of covert aggression in grades six through eight for items one and two. They tallied instances between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted girl peers as separate questionnaire items. Items 3 through 10 explored the subjective experience of covert aggression through short written narratives. Participants submitted their completed Reflective Questionnaires without discussion of results or recording their names. The gifted facilitators checked questionnaires for completion and coded individual questionnaires by grade level and school. They ensured privacy by placing completed questionnaires inside sealed envelopes secured in locked classroom file cabinets.

Structured Group Interview. After tabulating instances of covert aggression in grades six through eight between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted peers and providing short written narrative responses, the research team analyzed the data for patterns and trends. The primary researcher formulated questions based on the written narrative responses for items 3 through 10 to probe their subjective experiences with covert aggression based on the Reflective Questionnaire written narrative responses. Gifted facilitators scheduled Structured Group Interviews at their respective schools in the gifted resource room during a 50-minute seminar class. Participants sat in a semi-circle of chairs during the Structured Group Interviews, and they spoke without coercion or identifying information other than their grade level and school name. The primary researcher gently probed written narrative responses from the Reflective Questionnaires while the gifted facilitator typed participant comments on a notebook computer. We conducted the Structured Group Interviews without recording the sessions to encourage open discussion on sensitive topics.
The research team ensured privacy and confidentiality in the resource room with a closed door, and participants attended without identifying information such as nametags. The gifted facilitators typed responses saved on a dedicated flash drive stored in locked classroom file cabinets.

**Statistical Significance.** As an adaptation of the Peterson and Ray (2006b) study, we examined instances of covert aggression tallied on the Reflective Questionnaire from item one for the gifted/gifted group and item two for the gifted/non-exceptional group. We conducted the study in the spring semester and limited statistical analysis to grades six and seven, as most prevalently reported in the Peterson and Ray (2006b) study. We removed grade eight from the statistical analysis to ensure a more complete reflection from participants who had nearly completed grade seven.

We selected four independent variables—grade six, grade seven, gifted girls, and non-exceptional peers. One of the two secondary schools contained only grades seven and eight, so the grade six and grade seven variables provided an opportunity to examine covert aggression during the transition from elementary school at grade six to middle school in grade seven. The dependent variable measured the prevalence of covert aggression, both experienced and/or observed, between gifted adolescent girls and their non-exceptional peers in grade six and grade seven. To determine statistical significance in a relatively small sample size (N = 27), we considered effect size. For example, an effect size of 0.04, alpha level of 0.05, and power of 0.80 required a minimum sample size of N = 12.

We used two-way repeated measures ANOVA to examine the four independent variables of grade levels and peer groups with an alpha level of .05 measuring statistical significance. The four variables violated normality tests with each distribution positively skewed. Although all four variables contained one or two outliers, dropping the outliers would have eliminated participants who frequently experienced covert aggression. We used repeated measures as a robust test against the assumption of normality violation. We also considered the possibility that a larger sample size in future studies might correct the normalcy violation. For these reasons, we used the data as collected in the Reflective Questionnaire items one and two.

**Instruments**

**Reflective questionnaire.** Prior to the two pilot studies, the primary researcher contacted the Peterson and Ray research team and received an electronic copy of *A Survey of Gifted Eighth Graders About Bullying* (2006a, 2006b) as the basis for the adapted Reflective Questionnaire. The 24-item Peterson and Ray retrospective survey measured prevalence and effects of bullying from reflected experiences of 432 grade eight gifted students in 11 states. The Peterson and Ray survey asked participants, both male and female, to mark incidents for overt types of bullying behaviors such as hitting, pushing, stealing, and threats experienced from Kindergarten through grade eight.

The Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) survey included 15 types bullying and an “other” response. The types included name-calling, pushing/shoving, knocking books to the floor, hitting/punching, seven types of teasing, damaging possessions, taking possessions, beating up, and threats/intimidation. Because covert aggression occurs less openly and possibly more frequently, we adapted our Reflective Questionnaire to include eight topics derived from the Peterson and Ray survey: grades, intelligence, name calling, personal appearance, family, social status, possessions, and other (specify). Given the smaller participant size and scope of study, we broadened the grade level parameters of participants from grade 8 to include grades 7 through 12. We also limited reflective covert incidents to grades six through eight. Given the less physical nature of covert aggression and its association with adolescent girls, we limited gender participation to gifted adolescent girls.

The Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) survey instrument gathered information about participants’ physical characteristics and family demographics in order to investigate grade eight gifted students as both as perpetrators and victims. Our Reflective Questionnaire, however, included only the date, age, grade level, and gender without physical descriptions or family member status. Peterson and Ray also studied violent thoughts and deeds of gifted students, while we investigated covert aggression between two exceptionality groups, gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional adolescent girls. Participants in our study remained anonymous without identifying or defining information recorded on the Reflective Questionnaire (see Appendix A).

The Reflective Questionnaire defined covert aggression as incidents when individuals manipulate relationships as an attempt to control power among peers. Examples of covert aggression listed on the Reflective Questionnaire included talking behind someone’s back, spreading rumors or gossip, and pretended friendship. The written instructions asked participants to tally the number of instances of covert aggression, both experienced and/or observed as separate columns for grades six through eight with gifted/gifted girls as item one and gifted/non-exceptional girls as item two.

Both the Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) survey and Reflective Questionnaire instruments gathered quantitative data on prevalence and the subjective experience with written narrative items. Both instruments asked participants to identify the worst instance, effect on their lives, whether they told anyone and the subsequent response, if any, to their telling someone.
Peterson and Ray constructed their non-standardized survey based on their extensive collective experiences as school counselors and from research literature on bullying, primarily outside the field of gifted education.

**Structured Group Interview.** The Structured Group Interview used written narrative from the Reflective Questionnaire to probe the subjective experience of participants with covert aggression. Based on written narrative from Reflective Questionnaire items 3 through 10, the research team formulated interview questions regarding the worst incident, specific examples, comparisons between gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups, effect on their lives, and coping strategies. A specific example of a question emerging from short written narrative responses related to hazing in the gifted/gifted group at the high school when new girls arrived from another school and received gifted services with an established group of gifted girls.

**RESULTS**

Our study investigated the prevalence of covert aggression and subjective experience of gifted adolescent girls with gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups reflected from grades six through eight. To examine prevalence, we tabulated incidents for eight topics on Reflective Questionnaire items one and two. Participants tallied incidents for the eight topics as observed and experienced in two separate columns from grades six through eight. However, we combined the observed and experienced for each of the eight topics in our results to gain a more comprehensive understanding of prevalence. Because only one participant noted an incident in the “other” topic, we eliminated the “other” topic from further analysis and/or discussion in our study. Participants tallied instances for covert aggression in the gifted/gifted group for item one and the gifted/non-exceptional group for item two. We examined prevalence of covert aggression by topic, grade level, and exceptionality group.

**Prevalence by topic, exceptionality group, and grade level**

**Covert aggression topic.** Of the 1037 total incidents reflected by 27 participants in both gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups from grades six through eight, intelligence and name-calling (18%) scored equally with 187 incidents as the most prevalent topics, followed by grades as the second most prevalent topic (18%) with two fewer incidents. The next most prevalent topics included social status (16%) and appearance (15%). Possessions (11%) and family (4%) scored as the least prevalent topics of covert aggression. Participants reflected incidents related to personal qualities such as academic ability, name-calling, and social status more frequently than external elements such as possessions and families (see Figure 1).

**Topic and exceptionality group.** We examined topics and exceptionality groups and found most incidents \((N = 672, 65\%)\) occurred in the gifted/non-exceptional group with nearly half as many \((N = 365, 35\%)\) occurring in the gifted/gifted group. Name-calling (19%) scored highest in the gifted/non-exceptional group, and intelligence (23%) scored most prevalently in the gifted/gifted group. Social status (18%) scored as the second most prevalent topic in gifted/non-exceptional, and grades (17%) ranked second in the gifted/gifted group. A pattern began to emerge with academic topics (intelligence and grades) scoring highest in the gifted/gifted group, and more traditional (name-calling) or personal topics (social status) ranking highest in the gifted/non-exceptional group (see Figure 2). The possessions and family topics scored lowest in both groups. Intelligence and social status showed the most variance in the two groups with 7% higher prevalence for intelligence in the gifted/gifted group and 5% higher prevalence for social status in the gifted/non-exceptional group.
Grade level and exceptionality group. We examined covert aggression by grade level and exceptional group. Grade seven showed the most incidents in both groups with similar prevalence (38%) in both exceptionality groups. The grade six gifted/non-exceptionality group (33%) scored higher than the grade six gifted/gifted group (30%). The eighth grade gifted/non-exceptional group (29%) scored the lowest but similarly to the sixth grade gifted/gifted group (30%). Prevalence ranged from 110 incidents in the grade six gifted/gifted group to 255 incidents in the grade eight gifted/non-exceptional group. Covert aggression incidents occurred 5% to 8% more prevalently in both groups in grade seven than for both groups in grade six. Incidents occurred 6% to 9% more prevalently in grade seven than for both groups in grade eight (see Figure 3).

Topic and grade level. We examined the total number of incidents ($N = 1037$) by topic during grades six, seven, and eight. Across all three grades, topics with 60 or more incidents included name-calling in grade seven ($N = 74$), grades and social status in grade seven ($N = 71$), intelligence and grades in grade six ($N = 64$), intelligence in grade seven ($N = 66$), and appearance in grade seven ($N = 60$). Topics with 50-59 incidents included intelligence in grade eight ($N = 57$), name-calling in grade six ($N = 57$), social status in grade eight ($N = 51$), and grades in grade 8 ($N = 50$). During grades six through eight, possessions and family consistently ranked lowest with 36 to 38 incidents for possessions and 13 incidents for family in all grades (see Figure 4).

Middle school grades. The Peterson and Ray (2006b) prevalence findings peaked in middle school, so we examined the total number of incidents ($N = 1037$) across grades six, seven, and eight. The pattern across the grade levels resembled the Peterson and Ray findings. Covert aggressive incidents occurred most prevalently in grade seven ($N = 393$), followed by grade six ($N = 329$), and the lowest incidents in grade eight ($N = 315$). The number of incidents ranged from 315 to 393 with 78 more incidents in grade seven than in grade 8 and 64 incidents in grade 7 than in grade 6 (see Figure 5).

Prevalence by grade level. Although grade seven showed the most prevalence overall, we examined the relative prevalence in grades six through eight using percentages within grade levels. First, we determined the two most prevalent topics for each grade level. Then we compared those two topics across the three grade levels by percentages. In grade six, grades and intelligence topics scored equally (20%) as the most prevalent topics. In grade seven, name-calling (19%) ranked highest followed by equal scores for grades and social status (18%). Intelligence and name-calling (18%) scored highest in grade eight. Comparing those percentages across the three grade levels, the grades and intelligence (20%) topics in grade six emerged as the prevalent topics, followed by name-calling (19%) in grade seven. The remaining topics, grades and social status...
(18%) in grade seven, and intelligence and name-calling (18%) in grade eight, ranked next. This relative ranking of prevalence provided perspective on covert aggression behaviors as they occurred both within and across the grade levels (see Figures 6, 7, and 8).

Experienced and observed in grades six through eight. Because covert aggression occurs less openly than other forms of bullying, we asked participants to tally instances both observed and experienced in gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups. With 27 participants, we found 1037 incidents, observed and/or experienced, in the gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups reflected during grades six through eight. Participants at the middle school participants \((N = 11)\) experienced and/or observed 574 incidents, and participants from the high school \((N = 16)\) experienced and/or observed 463 incidents. Although we found similar trends for observed and/or experienced incidents in the middle school and high school, we analyzed only the high school incidents \((N = 463)\). In the observed column, intelligence (7%) ranked highest in the gifted/gifted group and name-calling (7%) highest in the gifted/non-exceptional group. In the experienced column, intelligence (6%) ranked highest in the gifted/gifted group and grades (8%) highest in the gifted/non-exceptional group. Participants in the high school marked the grades topic experienced and name-calling topic observed the topics in grades six through eight (see Figure 9).

Statistical and Practical Significance

We anticipated a higher prevalence of covert aggression in the gifted/non-exceptional group in grades six and seven and lower prevalence in the gifted/gifted group in grades six and seven. We tabulated tally marks for Reflective Questionnaire items one and two to determine the total number of incidents in grades six and seven. With grade six, grade seven, gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted as variables, we calculated a two-way ANOVA with repeated measures (within subjects factors) using \(\alpha = 0.05\). The results showed the Grade X Giftedness interaction as not significant, \(F(1, 26) = 0.68, p = 0.417\). Lacking significant interaction between variables, we considered main effects. Although we anticipated no significant difference in prevalence of covert aggression between grades

Figures 6, 7, and 8: Number and percentage of instances by topic in grades six, seven, and eight, respectively.

Figure 9: Number of instances observed and experienced by exceptionality group in grades 6-8 for high school \(N = 16\).
six and seven, the main effect of Grade was statistically significant, $F(1, 26) = 4.72$ and $p = 0.039$ (see Table 1). The results also showed a statistically significant main effect for Giftedness, $F(1, 26) = 564.90, p < 0.0001$ (see Table 1).

We found a statistically significant difference for prevalence in grades six and seven in the gifted/non-exceptional group. The results showed a higher prevalence of covert aggression in the gifted/non-exceptional group ($M = 9.037, SD = 5.188$) and lower prevalence in the gifted/gifted group ($M = 4.463, SD = 4.088$). The results also showed higher prevalence of covert aggression in grade seven ($M = 7.259, SD = 4.57$) than in grade six ($M = 6.241, SD = 6.206$) (see Table 2).

We did not report effect size for Grade X Giftedness interaction because the analysis showed no statistical significance. Results indicated a small, $= 0.19$ effect size for the Grade variable, and large, $= 0.98$, effect size for the Giftedness variable. From a practical perspective, the difference between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted groups in both grades six and grade seven showed the most significance. The results also showed a difference overall between grades six and grade seven.

**Subjective Experience**

**Reflective Questionnaire.** The research team organized narrative written responses from Reflective Questionnaire items 3-10 by grade level. Reflective Questionnaire item three asked participants to identify the worst instance of covert aggression experienced in the gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups from grades six through eight. Four participants from grades seven and eight related feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment when coming or going to the resource room. Seven participants from grades seven and eight indicated *nothing really bad or the normal stuff*. A grade eight participant stated, *I didn’t really see anything that bad. I came from a different school, and it wasn’t that bad there either.* Six participants from grades seven, eight, and nine noted name-calling behaviors such as geeks, nerds, or retards and talking about people behind their backs in the gifted/non-exceptional group. A grade 11 participant observed gifted kids who ganged up on another gifted girl calling her names in French that she didn’t understand. A grade 11 participant noted popular girls who asked, *Why’d all the nerds dress up for Nerd Day?* Another grade 11 participant indicated *new kids to the program were hazed if they were too weird. Regular kids were instantly liked.* A grade 12 participant experienced jealousy from non-exceptional peers who accused us of getting to do special stuff and extra activities. Another grade 12 participant summarized trends and patterns in covert aggression as *who is smarter in the gifted/gifted group and more personal or material things in the gifted/non-exceptional group.*

Reflective Questionnaire item four asked participants to comment on the effect of the worst experience of covert aggression on their lives. A seventh grade participant specified talking behind people’s backs and felt glad about good friends who don’t do that to me. An eighth grade participant indicated she and her friends talked about the embarrassment they felt when they had to walk in front of everyone to leave and go to gifted. However, another grade eight participant and her friends learned to joke that I’m on my way to ISS each time I go for gifted. Other grade eight girls felt hurt because some popular girls called us retards. Another eighth grade gifted girl stated, *I’ve been called a nerd before, and it wasn’t meant nicely.* A ninth grade participant felt embarrassed by her giftedness and tried to hide her intelligence. A 10th grade gifted girl learned not to push the gifted things onto people and to not identify myself as gifted. Another grade 10 girl stated, *I have breakdowns when I don’t perform as well as some other students.*

Only one participant in grade seven told anyone about the worst incident of covert aggression (item five). She talked

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Items six through nine explored patterns and trends and similarities and differences in gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups. Participants in high school commented more frequently on these items than middle school participants. A grade 10 participant stated, we [gifted girls] understand that other kids have talents in other areas. Another 10th grade participant found if you do badly on schoolwork with gifted girls, they empathize with feelings of failure because they've been there before too. A 12th grade participant stated, aggression between gifted girls is usually a challenge over who is smarter. Another 12th grade gifted girl found gifted boys and girls were always recognized as the "smart kids," and we all stuck together. A grade 12 gifted girl stated, my gifted friends were always around to help me with any problem. With gifted/non-exceptional peers, an eighth grade participant stated, my friends and I aren't cool. When hearing from her friends of name-calling incidents, she stated, they don't realize how much it hurts people's feelings. A 12th grade participant stated, non-gifted girls seem to experience more drama. Another 12th grade gifted girl observed, gifted and non-exceptional girls, the aggression is over more personal or material things. Yet another 12th grade girl found non-exceptional girls would always compare their grades to ours. If someone got a higher score than you on a test or worksheet they would brag about it (see Appendix B).

**Structured Group Interviews.** All participants (N = 27) who completed the Reflective Questionnaire also attended a Structured Group Interview at their respective schools. We grouped individual responses by Middle School Grades 7-8 (N = 11) and High School Grades 9-12 (N = 16). The primary investigator conducted the interviews while the school gifted facilitator typed responses on a notebook computer. The initial question probed Reflective Questionnaire item three written response about the worst incidence of covert aggression experienced and/or observed. Participants offered philosophical and practical understandings of dynamics between both gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups.

**Middle School.** Nearly all middle school participants (N = 11) responded during the Structured Group Interview. Their comments provided personal details about covert aggression experiences, compared experienced between the two groups, and provided reasons for differences between the two exceptional groups. For example, one middle school respondent philosophically attributed differences between the two groups to common interests. When gifted/gifted girls formed groups with common interests, they might avoid other groups; however, they did not fight.

The transition from elementary school to middle school seemed to place more distance between the gifted girls and their non-exceptional peers. Most respondents attributed incidents between gifted/non-exceptional girls to perceived academic difference. However, exclusion and general unfriendliness surfaced in both groups with the observation that gifted girls are better at not showing their aggression obviously. Participants approached the subject practically as, saying mean things and spreading rumors happens. Social groups formed in middle school based on popularity because you can't like everyone at school. Although respondents indicated they enjoyed the camaraderie with their intellectual peers, the pressure brought on by grades creates more competition. ... We all get picked on, no matter what.

**High School.** Participants in the high school Structured Group Interview (N = 16) perceived incidents between gifted/non-exceptional girls occurred because the non-exceptional girls didn't understand the purpose of [the] gifted program, and they thought it was unfair that we got to do special things. Newness to high school created difficulties for a gifted girl and her non-exceptional peers: No one would talk to me for weeks ... the only thing they knew about me was I was going to the gifted classroom. They thought I was a smarty-pants and stuck up. When the primary investigator inquired about hazing new girls in the gifted classroom, the girls laughed. We were a group and we didn't always include new kids in gifted class. This one girl was just ditzy. We liked things the way they were. The new student found even the gifted kids constantly questioned and second-guessed me. I had to prove myself to be associated with the gifted.

High school participants viewed themselves as very competitive yet supportive of each other in the gifted classroom. However, one participant stated, gifted girls do participate in bullying. Looking back they feel bad. They found boys liked smart girls, although some boys felt intimidated by gifted girls. One participant recalled experiences from seventh grade when her behaviors caused concern. I was not the perfect student ... gifted girls starting asking me if I really belonged in here. I undermined myself and never thought I was really good enough. I still don't. The high school gifted girls understood academic expectations and acted accordingly, Since I wouldn't let anyone cheat off me, I was called stuck up. Another high school girl was called the teacher's favorite. Girls would tell me you don't even work hard, and the teacher gives you a good grade just because she likes you. I told them I work hard for my grades. A high
school girl inquired, *is bullying the same as covert aggression? Girls are supposed to be nice and not get physical, so girls are sneakerier.* It appeared gifted/gifted girls experienced and/or observed incidents of covert aggression related to how well they fit into the resource room while incidents in the gifted/non-exceptional group related to academic achievement or perceived privilege related to placement in the gifted program.

**Discussion**

Given the lack of research on P-20 gifted students and bullying in general, results from this study on covert aggression may prove informative to educators, psychologists and counselors, administrators, and parents. Peterson and Ray (2006b) suggested victimization of gifted girls occurred most frequently in grades five through eight with prevalence rates of 38% and 39% (p. 155). Moreover, Peterson and Ray found prevalence for many types of bullying peaked in grade six, and repeated bullying occurred most frequently in grade six. Two of five gifted girls experienced bullying in grade six, and repeated bullying occurred most frequently in grade six. Two of five gifted girls experienced bullying in middle school (p. 160), and 24% of gifted girls experienced bullying more than 10 times in grade 5 (p. 155). Our results showed similar patterns with prevalence, although we limited our study to prevalence rather than frequency for individual participants.

**Reflective questionnaire implications**

Our exploratory study on covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls concurred with the Peterson and Ray (2006b) findings of 38% prevalence in grade seven. Given the smaller size and quota sampling, however, our study included gifted adolescent girls in grades 6 through 12. Considering the less overt nature of bullying behaviors, we asked participants to tally both observed and/or experienced incidents. They also distinguished incidents between two exceptionality groups, gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted girls. While the Peterson and Ray study analyzed bullying behaviors from Kindergarten through 12, we limited retrospective incidents to grades 6 through 8.

As our study addressed relational or covert aggression, the Reflective Questionnaire included one traditional type of aggression—name-calling—from the Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) survey. However, we derived the appearance, intelligence, grades, family, and social status topics from the teasing category on the Peterson and Ray survey. We further modified the Peterson and Ray survey by combining damaging possessions and taking possessions into the possessions topic.

Prior to implementing our exploratory study, the primary researchers conducted two small pilot studies with the Reflective Questionnaire in two secondary schools as convenience samples. Participants in the pilot studies understood and completed Reflective Questionnaire items and meet as a group for informal discussion. We included gifted adolescent boys in the pilot studies, and they added perspective to the insightful comments of gifted adolescent girls during informal group discussions. Including both genders during structured interviews could provide diverse perspective in future research. We anticipated the possibility of gifted boys present in the resource room during our study and proceeded to the exploratory study with unrevised instructions for items one and two on the Reflective Questionnaire. When we conducted the exploratory study, however, only gifted adolescent girls completed the questionnaire and participated in the group interviews.

**Covert aggression and academic ability**

We examined Reflective Questionnaire items for instances of covert aggression, observed and/or experienced, for eight specific topics between gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups. Due to a 0% prevalence score on the other topic, we eliminated it from further consideration. Of the total 1037 incidents in both groups across the three grade levels, the intelligence (N = 187, 18%) and name-calling (N = 187, 18%) topics emerged as the most prevalent, followed by grades (N = 185, 18%), social status (N = 170, 16%), and appearance (N = 158, 15%). Possessions (N = 111, 11%) and family (N = 39, 4%) scored least prevalently. With similar prevalence (18%), the combined topics of grades and intelligence, along with name-calling, placed the distinguishing feature of giftedness at the forefront of covert aggression incidents.

Overall, participants most often reflected incidents related to academic ability in grades six through eight, irrespective of exceptionality group (see Figure 1). Participants in the Peterson and Ray (2006b) study, however, identified traditional bullying behaviors such as name-calling followed by teasing about appearance as most prevalent in grades six through eight. Our findings ranked the social status higher than the Peterson and Ray study; however, possessions and family scored similarly as the least prevalent topics in grades six through eight. The increased prevalence of the academic topics (e.g., intelligence and grades) in both exceptionality groups seemed consistent with our two research questions anticipating giftedness as the distinguishing feature between the two exceptionality groups.

We examined topics within exceptionality groups and distinguished name-calling (19%) in gifted/non-exceptional and intelligence (23%) in gifted/gifted as most prevalent. This finding led to the observation that covert aggression occurred more in the gifted/non-exceptional than the gifted/gifted group. Similarly, intelligence in the gifted/gifted group scored 5% higher than the next most prevalent topic in either group (see Figure 2). We found topics clustered into four types of covert
aggression: traditional (name-calling), academic (intelligence and grades), personal (appearance and social status), and non-
personal (possessions and family). Our findings indicated
prevalence by topic clusters aligned with exceptionality
groups. The traditional cluster occurred most in the gifted/
non-exceptional group, and the academic cluster prevailed in
the gifted/gifted group. The personal cluster scored second
highest in both groups, followed by the non-personal cluster
in both groups.

**Topic cluster and grade level**

Covert aggression incidents ($N = 1037$) occurred more
prevalently in the gifted/non-exceptional (65%) than gifted/
gifted (35%) group across all three grade levels. However, when
disaggregated by groups and grade levels, grade seven
prevalence occurred equally in the gifted/non-exceptional (38%) and
gifted/gifted (38%) groups. We found 5% to 8% fewer incidents
in grades six and eight groups than grade seven
groups. The grade eight gifted/non-exceptional (29%) group
scored the lowest prevalence in both groups across all three
grades. This finding presented grade seven as the most
challenging for gifted girls, possibly as a transitional grade
into middle school. Grade eight appeared the least conflicted,
possible inferring a more settled environment in both groups
(see Figure 3).

We examined incidents by topic cluster and grade levels and found the academic cluster most prevalent in grade seven ($N = 137$), followed by grade six ($N = 128$), then grade eight ($N = 107$). The traditional cluster ranked highest in grade seven ($N = 74$), followed by grade six ($N = 57$), then grade eight ($N = 56$). The personal cluster scored highest in grade seven ($N = 131$), then grade eight ($N = 103$), and lowest in grade six ($N = 94$). The non-personal cluster scored nearly equally in grades six ($N = 50$), seven ($N = 51$), and eight ($N = 49$). All four topic
centers scored highest in grade seven (see Figure 4). This
finding aligned with incidents combined in both groups with
grade seven (38%) most prevalent, followed by grade six (31%)
and grade eight (31%) (see Figure 5). Prevalence by grade
level differed from the Peterson and Ray study (2006b) where
grade six (44%) showed the most prevalence, followed by grade
seven (44%) and grade eight (42%) (p. 155).

Ranked by percentage, however, the academic cluster in grade
six (39%) scored highest, followed by grade seven (35%), then
grade eight (34%), with an average of 36% prevalence for all
three grades. The personal cluster scored higher in all three
grades ($X = 32\%$) than either the traditional ($X = 18\%$) or non-
personal ($X = 14\%$) clusters. The academic cluster scored
highest in all three grades, but with a higher percentage in
grade six than grade seven (see Figures 6, 7, and 8). Our findings
contrasted with Peterson and Ray (2006b) where traditional
(name-calling) and personal (appearance) clusters ranked
higher in all three grades (p. 156).

**Practical significance for school transitions**

We anticipated lower prevalence in the gifted/gifted group
than the gifted/non-exceptional group and a higher prevalence
in the gifted/non-exceptional group. Statistical analysis of both
expectations proved partially correct. Using a two-way Anova,
we found no significant interaction for Giftedness or Grade.
However, when we considered main effect for the four
independent variables (grade six, grade seven, gifted, and non-
exceptional) with the dependent variable (covert aggression),
we found significance for Giftedness and Grade (see Table 1).

Combined incidents for grades six and seven in the gifted/
non-exceptional group ($N=474, 66\%$) exceeded the gifted/gifted
($N = 248, 34\%$) group combined incidents for grades six and
seven (see Figure 3). We found practical significance with more
prevalence in the gifted/non-exceptional group than the
gifted/gifted group and between grades six and seven with more
prevalence in grade seven (see Table 2). This significance
aligned with prevalence findings where the gifted/non-
exceptional group (38%) scored similarly with the gifted/gifted
(38%) group in grade seven. Moreover, the grade six gifted/
non-exceptional (33%) group scored higher than the grade six
gifted/gifted (30%) group (see Figure 3).

The gifted/non-exceptional group showed an overall higher
prevalence of covert aggression than the gifted/gifted group.
We might attribute the lower prevalence in the gifted/gifted
group to the sense of community and engagement often found
with academic peers in gifted and talented programs. The
results indicated a higher prevalence of covert aggression in
the gifted/non-exceptional group with both statistical and
practical significance. These findings seemed consistent with
the Peterson and Ray (2006b) findings of bullying in the general
education population that peaked in grades six through eight
(p. 155).

With fewer covert aggression incidents in the gifted/gifted
than gifted/non-exceptional group, our prevalence findings
implied gifted students viewed gifted and talented programs as relatively safe environments. Peterson and Ray (2006b)
found 16% fewer gifted students in grade 8 engaged in bullying
as bullies than the general education population (p. 148). The
more homogenous learning environment with intellectual peers
found in gifted and talented resource rooms might explain
reduced instances of covert aggression in the gifted/gifted
group. Our prevalence findings of increased covert aggression in
the gifted/non-exceptional group may have occurred during
a school transition from elementary grade six to middle school
grade seven. This finding underscored the need to provide

support for gifted learners in both the general education and gifted and talented resource room environments during the transition from elementary to middle schools.

Grade levels

Eleven participants in our study attended a suburban middle school in a district where elementary school ended at grade six, and middle school began in grade seven. In the transition from elementary to middle school, participants may have encountered students in their new school that could have accounted for increased prevalence of covert aggression. Those participants may have observed and/or experienced fewer instances of covert aggression in grade six (N = 329, 32%) with peers known throughout their elementary school years in a more familiar environment than grade seven in the middle school (N = 393, 38%). Similarly, 16 participants entered attended middle school beginning in grade six and may have observed and/or experienced increased incidents of covert aggression in the transition from elementary school in grade five to middle school in grade six. In either case, more settled peer relationships in grade eight (N = 315, 30%) might explain stabilized or fewer incidents in grade eight than either sixth or seventh grades (see Figures 6, 7, and 8).

We asked participants to tally both observed and/or experienced instances of covert aggression in order to gain a more inclusive perspective of gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups. We analyzed prevalence of observed and experienced (N = 463) instances for participants in the high school (N = 16) and found 37% in the gifted/gifted group, and 63% in the gifted/non-exceptional group. Of the 463 incidents high school girls tallied, they marked 59% in the observed columns and 41% in the experienced columns. This finding indicated 26% fewer instances in the gifted/gifted group and 18% fewer instances experienced than observed. The academic cluster scored highest in both groups with grades (N = 35) in the gifted/non-exceptional group and intelligence (N = 31) in the gifted/gifted group (see Figure 9).

Although findings in this study showed a small practical difference between grades six and seven, increased sample size in future studies might provide a clearer understanding of covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls. Studies with P-20 gifted student populations could also provide further insight into covert aggression experienced and/or observed at various grade levels throughout their school years. Our prevalence findings addressed research question one, How many instances of covert aggression did gifted adolescent girls observe and/or experience in eight specific topics between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted girl exceptionality groups in grades six through eight?

Subjective experience

Peterson and Ray (2006a) interviewed 57 of the 432 participants who completed the survey, and they transcribed data from those recorded interviews to investigate the subjective experience of grade eight gifted and covert bullying. Our study examined the subjective experience with covert aggression through Reflective Questionnaire written narrative responses and Structured Group Interview typed comments. Peterson and Ray (2006a) found “many victims suffered in silence, struggled to understand bullying, assumed responsibility for stopping it themselves, despaired when it continues” (p. 252). Gifted adolescent girls in our study tended to minimize instances of covert aggression as nothing really bad and rarely reported incidents—and then only to friends, a mother, or if asked. The Peterson and Ray (2006a) study found “a dark side socially” of giftedness that could mean social marginalization and a vulnerability to bullying (p. 262). The literature demonstrated gifted learners often used their intelligence to mitigate academic difficulties, problems, and challenges they faced without seeking external assistance from teachers, counselors, or administrators.

Compared with Reflective Questionnaire written narrative, the Structured Group Interview comments focused more on differences and similarities with gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups with few specific incidents of covert aggression discussed. However, one issue of concern surfaced in both narratives about the gifted/gifted group. Although both written and spoken comments indicated an overall sense of safety and support in the gifted resource room, high school participants discussed hazing of new gifted girls in their comments. Typically, identification of gifted students occurred at the elementary school level, with fewer referrals at the secondary level. However, when gifted students transferred from another school into the gifted resource room, the change required acceptance into an otherwise established group. When the primary researcher gently probed this issue during the Structured Group Interview, the high school girls laughed and specified difficulty accepting a ditzy new gifted girl. During the group interview, one high school participant stated gifted girls constantly questioned and second-guessed her, and that she needed to prove herself to be associated with the gifted girls. Future studies, particularly at the high school level, might specify hazing or marginalizing as a form of covert aggression. Counselors, gifted facilitators, and parents need awareness of this dynamic to support new gifted girls transitioning into an established resource room environment.

Subjective comments in both the Peterson and Ray (2006a) and our study found a profound impact of aggressive behaviors on gifted students during a developmental phase when social
connectedness helps adolescents experience an overall sense of well-being and safety in schools (p. 252). In our study, participant comments indicated they felt different when they left their regular education classrooms to receive services in the gifted resource room. Some participants learned to hide their intelligence or abilities to avoid covert aggressive incidents such as name-calling (e.g., nerd, geek or retard). The Reflective Questionnaire written comments and Structured Group Interview discussion addressed our second research question, How did gifted adolescent girls view their subjective experiences with covert aggression related to eight specific topics between gifted/non-exceptional and gifted/gifted girl exceptionality groups in grades six through eight?

LIMITATIONS
Covert aggression

Our study examined a less physical and less overt type of bullying known as covert or relational aggression. The literature on bullying in the general population indicated girls tended to participate more frequently in covert aggression than boys who used more physical and overt forms of bullying. The Peterson and Ray (2006b) study found bullying behaviors between gifted students occurred most prevalently in grades six through eight. We expanded the participants from grade eight in the Peterson and Ray study to include participants from grades 7 through 12. We also reduced grade level reflections from Kindergarten through eighth grade to sixth through eighth grades. These changes reduced alignment with participants (N = 432) and methodology in the Peterson and Ray research, but increased our sample size and expanded the scope beyond grade eight. The increased sample size benefited the subjective experience evaluation with Reflective Questionnaire written narrative and Structured Group Interview typed comments. For example, the Peterson and Ray (2006a) subjective experience interviewees (N = 57) included 13% of the participants (N = 432) from the quantitative study on prevalence. In contrast, our study included all participants (N = 27, 100%) who completed the Reflective Questionnaire and also participated in the Structured Group Interviews. Rather than recording and transcribing interviews, we typed comments from the group interviews and crosschecked them between the primary researcher and the gifted facilitators from both schools.

Size and sample

As exploratory research examining covert aggression between gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups reflected during grades six through eight, another limitation in our study concerned small sample size (N = 27) with gifted adolescent girls in two suburban schools. A normal distribution of gifted students might yield 5% (N = 5) in a population of 100 general education students. Given equally distributed gender within this population, gifted adolescent girls could represent 2.5% (N = 2.5) persons. However, many schools fail to identify gifted students, especially those from underserved populations. For example, the participating middle school of 1000 students included 11 (1.1%) gifted adolescent girls, and the high school of 550 students yielded 16 (2.9%) participants in the study. Future studies might consider school selection by a predetermined quota of gifted girls based on an identification rate of giftedness closer to 2.5% of the school population to approximate a more normal distribution of gifted adolescent girls. We considered all identified gifted adolescent girls who returned consent forms in both schools eligible for our study. Only three identified gifted adolescent girls did not return the consent forms, so 90% of all identified gifted girls in both schools participated in the study. From this perspective, all gifted girls in both schools received an equal chance to participate in the study.

Instruments

The Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) study used a non-standardized survey validated by experience level of the research team and relevant literature on bullying outside of the field of gifted education. We included name-calling from Peterson and Ray survey as a traditional topic. However, given the hidden or covert aggression behaviors in our study, we adapted the types of bullying from the Peterson and Ray survey as topics of covert aggression. These topics included teasing about grades, intelligence, social status, appearance, possessions, and family. We added an eighth topic, other, to ensure inclusiveness of incidents but disregarded it due to a 0% prevalence score. Future studies might crosscheck the Reflective Questionnaire topics with themes or topics emerging from the Reflective Questionnaire written narrative and Structured Group Interviews comments. For example, our study identified exclusion, hazing, mean faces, humiliation, embarrassment, and spreading rumors from the subjective experience as potential topics.

The Reflective Questionnaire asked participants to specify only their age, grade level, and gender, so it is unknown if the 27 participants represented an underserved population of gifted learners. Future studies might examine covert aggression in minority gifted adolescent populations with marginalization a potential topic. We were also unable to determine whether physical height and weight and family status such as birth order and number of siblings. Future studies might also explore physical size and family status included in the Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) studies which correlated more clearly with appearance, family, and possessions topics in our study.
The Structured Group Interview included all participants (N = 27) who completed the Reflective Questionnaire. Rather than conducting recorded and transcribed individual interviews, we interviewed all participants at each school as a whole group. To encourage open discussion, we took notes on a laptop computer rather than transcribing recorded interviews. However, individual interviews could yield more in-depth responses on their subjective experience with participants who may have preferred to speak privately about sensitive topics rather than in a group setting. Recorded individual interviews might also capture subtleties such as voice volume, nuances of tone, and expressiveness to increase understanding of covert aggression and gifted adolescent girls.

**Self-report and reflection**

Peterson and Ray (2006a) considered eighth grade ideal for their retrospective study from Kindergarten through eighth grade since students of 13 or 14 years of age possessed sufficient maturity to evaluate and process complex emotions related to bullying experiences. It is unknown whether students might reflect overt or covert experiences more readily; however, our study limited reflection to grades 6 through 8 and included gifted girls from grades 7 through 12 to optimize reflection and maturity. As reflected instances, participant tallies approximated prevalence in gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups. Given the hidden nature of covert aggression, we asked participants to include both observed and/or experienced incidents. We specified exceptionality in groups to determine prevalence in the general education and special education environments.

The narrative responses of participants indicated they tended to minimize or downplay the subjective experience as *not anything really bad*. The number of incidents tallied for covert aggression (N = 1037) from 27 participants in grades six through eight exceeded incidents of bullying (N = 584) for 432 participants in grades six through eight in the Peterson and Ray (2006b) study. Although we triangulated our study with self-reported bullying in the general population (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b) and literature on covert aggression outside the field of gifted education, future studies might include a secondary level of inquiry from parents, friends, and teachers to further validate findings and increase reliability of the self-report and reflection.

**Conclusion**

Research literature and anecdotal evidence showed adolescent girls used a covert form of bullying while adolescent boys engaged in physical or overt aggression. Yet the impact of relational aggression on the social and emotional development of adolescent girls seemed significant. Peterson and Ray (2006a, 2006b) conducted a groundbreaking study on bullying and eighth grade gifted students. We used their retrospective study as the basis for our exploratory study on covert aggression conducted with 27 participants from two secondary schools. We evaluated quantitative results from the Reflective Questionnaire items one and two as topic clusters of incidents and explored the qualitative subjective experience from items 3-10 written narrative responses and Structured Group Interview typed comments. Participants noted both observed and/or experienced instances of covert aggression for eight topics in grades six through eight and commented on their subjective experiences with gifted/gifted and gifted/non-exceptional groups. We analyzed prevalence and found incidents clustered together as academic, traditional, personal, and non-personal topics. The tallied results from the Reflective Questionnaire and comments for the Structured Group Interviews indicated gifted/gifted group most frequently engaged in academic topics of covert aggression, while the gifted/non-exceptional group used the more traditional topic of name-calling (e.g., *nerd*, *geek*, *retard*) occurred most frequently. Gifted girls who transferred into the resource room at the secondary level, especially high school, experienced stress through a form of hazing as they proved themselves to the gifted girl group.

Future studies with increased sample size could meet normalcy assumptions and increase reliability and generalization of results. Gathering data from a broader range of grade levels and less homogenous demographics might identify patterns and trends to provide greater insight on covert aggression and diverse gifted learners. It is unknown if any participants identified themselves as an underserved population; however, further studies on covert aggression and gifted girls from minority populations might identify additional or different patterns and trends. We hope this study will yield valuable insight for educators, parents, and health care professionals as they seek to provide safe, inclusive learning environments for all students to reach their academic potential in P-20 schools.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
REFLECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

Date _______  Age _______  Grade level _______  Gender _______

Covert aggression occurs when individuals manipulate relationships as an attempt to control power among peers. Specific behaviors may include talking behind someone’s back, spreading rumors or gossip, pretended friendship, etc. This study explores the covert aggression experiences of gifted adolescent girls with intellectual and age peers.

1. Please place a tally mark indicating the frequency of specific covert aggressive behaviors related to the suggested topics listed which you experienced (if female) or observed (if male or female) between gifted girls and other gifted girls in the respective grade level.

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<th>TOPICS</th>
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2. Please place a tally mark indicating the frequency of specific covert aggressive behaviors related to the suggested topics listed which you experienced (if female) or observed (if male) between gifted girls and their non-exceptional age girl peers in the respective grade level.

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3. What was the worst instance of covert aggression you experienced (if female) or observed (if male or female) between gifted girls and their intellectual or non-exceptional girls age peers in grades six through eight?

4. What, if anything, was the effect of that experience on your life?

5. Did you tell anyone about the instance? Yes No If yes, what was the response?

6. What patterns or trends, if any, did you experienced (if female) or observed (if male or female) differences between gifted girls and other gifted girls in grades six through eight?

7. What patterns or trends, if any, did you experienced (if female) or observed (if male or female) differences between gifted girls and their non-exceptional girl age peers in grades six through eight?

8. What similarities, if any, do you see in the covert aggression instances between gifted girls and other gifted girls and between gifted girls and their non-exceptional girl age peers?
9. What differences, if any, do you see in the covert aggression instances between gifted girls and other gifted girls and between gifted girls and their non-exceptional girl age peers in grades six through eight?

10. What further comments might you make these experiences or observations?
Appendix B

Reflective Questionnaire

Combined Responses by Grade Level

Grade 7

I haven’t seen anything really bad, but I’ve seen people talking about people behind their backs. I only talked about it with my mom, just casually at home. She helped me to think about what I would do in that situation. It made me glad that I have good friends who don’t do that to me.

I just notice the normal stuff like people talking about other people. I’ve talked to my friends about it but didn’t really report it.

I feel awkward when I go to the [gifted] room from the cafeteria during lunch because you walk in front of everyone with your tray. They ask you where you’re going or look at you weird. They automatically think you’re in ISS or in trouble or something if you have to leave the lunch room. My friends and I joke that I’m on my way to ISS each time I go for gifted.

Grade 8

I haven’t seen anything really bad.

I haven’t noticed anything, really. Haven’t told anyone.

There wasn’t anything really bad that I noticed.

There was a special dress-up day (spirit day) where not a lot of people dressed up, but some did. It was Nerd Day. The popular girls said “Why’d all the nerds dress up for Nerd Day?”

I’ve been called a nerd before, and it wasn’t meant nicely. Now that the new cafeteria has the kitchen in the back, you have to walk in front of everyone to leave and go to gifted. Before, the kitchen was outside the cafeteria so no one really noticed if you left … they couldn’t see you leave. It’s sort of embarrassing. We talk about it a lot.

Nothing too bad. It’s not a huge deal, but it does feel weird when we go to the gifted resource room. Sometimes people ask you where you’re going and you tell them, but then it’s not such a big deal. Sometimes it’s a little embarrassing.

I didn’t really see anything that bad. I came from a different school, and it wasn’t that bad there either.

My friends and I aren’t cool, and some popular girls called us retards. I didn’t hear it, but my friend said she did. They don’t realize how much it hurts people’s feelings. Didn’t really tell anyone, just talked about it with my friends.

Grade 9

I’ve experienced name calling because of being gifted. I felt embarrassed and tried to hide my intelligence.

Grade 10

I learned not to push the gifted things onto people and to not identify myself as gifted. Others may have known, but I would only tell if asked.

We [gifted girls] understand that other kids have talents in other areas.

I have breakdowns when I don’t perform as well as some other students.
If you do badly on schoolwork with gifted girls, they empathize with feelings of failure because they’ve been there before too.

**Grade 11**

Some gifted kids ganged up on another gifted girl calling her names in French that she didn’t understand. It made me feel guilty for not telling her what was going on.

New gifted kids to the program were hazed if they were too weird…or ditzy. Regular kids were instantly liked.

**Grade 12**

Aggression between gifted girls is usually a challenge over who is smarter. Gifted and non-exceptional girls, the aggression is over more personal or material things.

The gifted boys and girls were always recognized as the “smart kids,” and we all stuck together.

My gifted friends were always around to help me with any problem.

Non-gifted girls seem to experience more drama.

Other non-exceptional girls would always compare their grades to ours. If someone got a higher score than you on a test or worksheet they would brag about it.

A few kids were jealous and accuse us of getting to do special stuff and extra activities. I kind of felt like being gifted was a privilege.
Appendix C
Structured Group Interview
Combined Responses by School

Suburban Middle School
Grades 7-8

The worst covert aggression happens because girls think that being in gifted makes you geeky or nerdy. They also do covert aggression a lot when it has to do with guys. Once people get to know me, they don’t think I’m nerdy. I stay away from the drama over guys, so it doesn’t really affect me. There aren’t really problems between the gifted girls, but if there are, it’s because they hang out with different groups outside of gifted. Sometimes people act timid towards you when you come from or go to the gifted room, like you’re different. Girls hang with girls with the same interests. Girls might avoid other girls but there are no fights or anything. Covert aggression is less in gifted girls and gifted girls probably because they know they have at least one thing in common. The relationship between gifted girls and non-exceptional girls changes from elementary to middle school – it seems more distant.

Saying mean things and spreading rumors happens. People just think different than you think. Gifted girls all get along because we’re all on the same intellectual base. Usually if someone doesn’t like someone outside of gifted or because that person did something, but that rarely happens. Girls in lower social rank or that appear different usually get picked on in the non-exceptional category. The occasional “popular” kid has a rumor about them, too. All girls hear things, but girls from both parties may not spread them. With a smaller group like gifted, you have less feuds because you aren’t mixed with kids you dislike. With all peers, you find people you like and dislike. I’ve never been made fun of for being smart. Actually, people and teachers depend, trust, and look up to you more.

Sometimes teased about my facial appearance. I asked my friends how to clean (for acne) my face better. I haven’t noticed as much making fun in the seventh grade. There is more covert aggression between gifted girls and non-exceptional girls. People make much more fun of your intelligence than much else no matter who or where you are.

I have never experienced or observed any specific bad covert aggression. Most of the gifted girls tend to stay together, except for a few who are considered popular. Some of the non-gifted girls don’t like that we get to leave [school] sometimes. The gifted girls sometimes like to brag, but when they’re with other gifted girls, they’re quieter.

I saw one girl was getting called names pretty badly behind her back by her “friends.” I then decided that I would never do that. A lot of girls do that at this age, and you can’t control it. Other girls would pick on each other for no reason based on if they liked them. In both [gifted and non-exceptional], girls still get picked on for their looks and status. But gifted girls don’t pick on anyone based on grades or how smart they are. With non-gifted girls, the bullying is much stronger.

Haven’t really experienced or observed a lot of covert aggression. Gifted girls never really picked on each other. In seventh and eighth grade, they tease you about being smart, but not really in sixth grade.

A lot of exclusion and general unfriendliness. This happened especially the second semester of seventh grade. The first time I saw it happen, I was shocked. Gifted girls tend to want to hang out with other gifted girls. The ones who dress nicely with the trends tend to be higher in social status than with non-gifted girls that dress similarly. It all comes down to popularity, though there’s not a spoken word about who is and who isn’t. This is both in gifted and non-gifted. Gifted girls are better at not showing their aggression obviously. It’s hard to spot than with non-exceptional girls. Gifted girls don’t use Facebook to post aggression, mostly texting. Gifted girls are more comfortable with other gifted girls.

My biggest thing is probably walking through the lunch room when everyone is staring at you. It is just really awkward and embarrassing, and it makes you feel nerdy. Me and my gifted friends talk about it all the time; it’s just one of those what can you do’s. It wasn’t a big deal in sixth grade, but in middle school it is considered nerdy to be in gifted. In gifted, we are all friends. Deep down you’re still dealing with the core issues of popularity and status, and that’s what leads to aggression in both instances. Among your gifted friends, it isn’t a big deal to be gifted, but it is sort of uncool to be gifted in middle school. Sometimes it’s like two different worlds. Overall it’s a great experience.
When someone asks where you’re going or what you’re doing, and you [say] “Oh, it’s a gifted thing,” it makes you feel awkward. Most of the gifted girls are all friendly with each other. Everyone can be a little judgmental and judge each other. A lot of the girls in gifted are friendly to each other but it varies a lot when you’re with the rest of the girls in our school. A lot of the girls in gifted are really nice and aren’t mean to each other, but it’s different when it’s with everyone because you can’t like everyone in the school.

The pressure brought on by grades creates more competition. It might not be a giant competition with other people, but it’s a race with yourself. When grades or achievements are publicized, girls compare themselves to others who don’t get the recognition or who didn’t achieve. Gifted girls are kinder to the non-exceptional girls.

Some of the popular girls call me a retard behind my back. I really couldn’t care less what they think of me. I told my friends, and they reacted the way I did. I know one girl who will give me a weird look, but that’s all. I’m “not cool” so I get picked on more than some other girls. We all get picked on, no matter what. I think all girls pick on each other a lot. The mean girls need to know what they’re doing hurts people.

The pressure brought on by grades creates more competition. It might not be a giant competition with other people, but it’s a race with yourself. When grades or achievements are publicized, girls compare themselves to others who don’t get the recognition or who didn’t achieve. Gifted girls are kinder to the non-exceptional girls.

Suburban High School
Grades 9-12

Kids always thought we got to do special things in [the gifted program] like take field trips and get out of the class. They would say we were privileged. They didn’t understand purpose of gifted program.

They thought it was unfair that we got to do special things.

“Is bullying the same as covert aggression?” Girls are supposed to be nice and not get physical so girls are sneakier.

Since I wouldn’t let anyone cheat off me, I was called stuck up.

I was called teacher’s favorite. Girls would tell me you don’t even work hard and the teacher gives you good grades just because she likes you. I told them I work hard for my grades.

I hated working in groups and doing all the work just to get a decent grade. Kids would act like they wanted me in their group, but they just wanted me to do all the work.

No one would talk to me for weeks when I moved here. I didn’t know anyone and the only they knew about me was that I was going to gifted classroom. They thought I was a smarty-pants and stuck up.

When I was in seventh grade I remember I used to get in trouble a lot. I was not the perfect student…gifted girls starting asking me if I really belonged in here. I undermined myself and never thought I was really good enough. I still don’t.

The girls were reminded this was a safe place to talk and asked to self-reflect. Gifted girls do participate in bullying. Looking back they feel bad.

We are all very competitive. Usually it’s a positive competition, mostly good and supportive….but it’s difficult to be new in here [the gifted program].

We were a group and we didn’t always include new kids in gifted class. This one girl was just ditzy. We liked things the way they were.

We didn’t appreciate new kids either… interacting is hard.
When I came here, even the gifted kids constantly questioned and second-guessed me. I hang out with different groups that have strong personalities. I had to prove myself to be associated with the gifted.

Most [boys] like smart [girls] since we can handle things. Some [boys] are intimidated though.